Lexicon of Lies:
Terms for Problematic Information

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INTRODUCTION

Recent controversies over "fake news," and concerns over entering a "post-fact" era, reflect a burgeoning crisis: problematically inaccurate information, it seems, is circulating in ways that disrupt politics, business, and culture. Journalists, commentators, policymakers, and scholars have a variety of words at their disposal — *propaganda*, *disinformation, misinformation*, and so on — to describe the accuracy and relevance of media content. These terms can carry a lot of baggage. They have each accrued different cultural associations and historical meanings, and they can take on different shades of meaning in different contexts. These differences may seem small, but they matter. The words we choose to describe media manipulation can lead to assumptions about how information spreads, who spreads it, and who receives it. These assumptions can shape what kinds of interventions or solutions seem desirable, appropriate, or even possible.

Some information is problematic: it is inaccurate, misleading, inappropriately attributed, or altogether fabricated. This guide examines terms and concepts for problematic information. One of the challenges of describing problematic information is that many of these familiar terms do not have mutually exclusive definitions. Rather, their meanings overlap, and word choice can be a matter of perspective. These factors can make attempts to describe problematic information imprecise, inconsistent, and subjective. Intentionality and accuracy may be particularly hard to parse in the context of networked media, accelerating news cycles, and declining faith in social institutions. Longstanding terminologies can fall short of describing these new complexities.

Acknowledging and being mindful of these challenges can help writers communicate how and why information is problematic, moving beyond labels that might themselves be misleading. This guide offers a discussion of what common terms for problematic information are taken to mean, and examines how they can sow confusion, cause breakdowns in communication, or fail to capture current events.

MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Problematic information tends to be seen as falling into one of two categories: misinformation or disinformation. Both terms refer to information that is inaccurate, incorrect, or misleading. But what separates disinformation from misinformation is intent.

Misinformation is information whose inaccuracy is unintentional. This includes information reported in error, as when the *Chicago Daily Tribune,* relying on its political analysts and early poll returns, famously misreported in its early edition that Dewey had defeated Truman in the 1948 U.S. presidential election. The late evening edition corrected the error.

Figure 1. Tweet from *The Daily Express* reporting inaccurate information about a Manchester shooting.

Figure 2. Screenshot of YouTube video from the Columbia Chemicals misinformation campaign.

Misinformation can spread when journalists misinterpret or fail to independently verify a source's claims. This is especially likely to occur during an unfolding crisis. News organizations have a duty to keep people informed, especially when public safety may be at risk. However, they also compete for the public's attention. This gives them an incentive to publish information quickly, to "scoop" competing news outlets.

For example, shortly after a bombing attack at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, England, the *Daily Express* tweeted that a gunman was outside a local hospital, information which turned out to be inaccurate.[1] The *Express* acted too quickly in this case, publishing information that was not verified and amplifying the confusion of the moment. The newspaper later deleted the erroneous tweet and updated its reporting to reflect that the area had been searched by police and declared clear. The retraction suggests that the newspaper did not intend to mislead, but the incident also shows how simply weighing intention does not adequately address the complexity of contemporary media practices.

Disinformation is information that is deliberately false or misleading. For example, in September 2014, false reports of an explosion and toxic fume hazard at Columbian Chemicals, a chemical manufacturing plant in St. Mary Parish, Louisiana, spread online via scores of fake Twitter accounts, spoofed versions of local news websites, YouTube videos, and text messages to local residents. No explosion had, in fact, taken place. The texts, tweets, websites, and apparent eyewitness videos were part of what appears to have been a "highly coordinated disinformation campaign," one of many that journalist Adrian Chen reportedly traced to a Russian organization known as the Internet Research Agency.[2]

> Computational systems can incentivize or automate media content in ways that result in broader circulation regardless of accuracy or intent.

As the preceding examples illustrate, both misinformation and disinformation spread readily via social media; this is due to a combination of social and technical factors. Digitally networked information environments can amplify the circulation of media content, and social media sharing often complicates the question of intent. Computational systems can incentivize or automate media content in ways that result in broader circulation regardless of accuracy or intent. The "trending topics" lists on social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are a relatively simple example of computational systems affecting the circulation of content. Such lists elevate a particular topic's perceived importance, and can be gamed relatively easily if an individual or group wants to create the impression of widespread public interest in a topic.

Automated systems are also susceptible to bugs, as when Quakebot, a Twitter bot that tweets automatically when the U.S. Geologic Survey issues seismic activity alerts, falsely reported that an 8.6 magnitude earthquake had hit California on June 21, 2017, triggered by a researcher's attempt to remedy inaccurate data about a 1925 earthquake.[3]

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Finally, digital platforms systematize incentives that can drive the spread of problematic information. Consider the flourishing of questionable news sites that published unsourced, unverifiable, or fabricated stories during the 2016 election cycle. Many of these were money-making ventures, whose owners were driven less by politics than by the prospect of profit from clicks. These sites' curators were not necessarily aiming to deliberately mislead the public; rather they had a specific plan to game Google's AdSense system which overrode any concerns about whether the stories they posted were true or false.[4] Misleading the public was an incidental side effect of the primary goal: making money. News content circulates on social

media alongside entertainment content, and the lines between the two can be hard to discern. Information need not be accurate to be popular or profitable.

In short, the intentions behind any given piece of media content are rarely clear. Further, whether a given story or piece of content is labeled as misinformation or disinformation can depend as much on an actor's intent as on the professional standards of the person evaluating it. Journalists and social scientists, for example, are cautious in making claims about an actor's intent, because misrepresentations can lead to reputational damage, professional sanctions, and legal repercussions. If an actor's intent appears ambiguous, or if there is no verifiable proof of intent to deceive, journalists and others may label something as misinformation rather than disinformation. Actors who intend to deceive their audiences may exploit these professionals' cautiousness, relying on plausible deniability as a defense.[5,6] This state of affairs creates an imbalance of power: actors who distribute deceptive or misleading content can do so without facing major threats to their own credibility, while posing potential legal and reputational threats to those who report on or critique them.

PUBLICITY AND PROPAGANDA

Information campaigns are organized communicative activities that aim to reach large groups of people.[7] With many information campaigns, there is no question that they are deliberate attempts to persuade. The terms **advertising**, **public relations**, **public diplomacy** (or **public affairs**), **information operations**, and **propaganda** all describe deliberate, systematic information campaigns, usually conducted through mass media forms — the press, broadcast media, digital media, public events and exhibitions, and so on.

> Whether a particular campaign is labeled publicity or propaganda can depend largely on the perspective of the person assessing it.

Persuasive information campaigns present a mixture of facts and interpretations that aim to link brands, people, products, or nations with certain feelings, ideas, and attitudes. This blending of facts and interpretations can make the "accuracy" of such campaigns difficult to assess. It can be difficult to distinguish facts from interpretations (indeed, the point of the campaign may be precisely to blur them), and political perspectives or worldviews can color any assessment of factual or interpretive accuracy. Whether a particular campaign is labeled publicity or propaganda can depend largely on the perspective of the person assessing it.

All sorts of organizations take part in deliberate, systematic information campaigns. Companies use **advertising** to try to persuade consumers to buy goods and services. Non-profit and advocacy groups use advertising as well, to try to persuade people to adopt certain ideas or attitudes. Closely related to advertising is **public relations** or **publicity**, in which companies, nonprofit organizations, or other nongovernmental groups try to persuade people to view their group more positively. [8]

Figure 3. An advertorial published in the *New York Times*.

Both public relations and advertising are forms of marketing, and in some cases, public relations overlaps with advertising. For example, Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" was a long-running advertising and public relations campaign for Dove soaps, lotions, and hair care products that aimed to associate Dove products with body positivity and a broad, inclusive definition of beauty. The campaign included online films about self-acceptance and in-person body confidence workshop resources, as well as advertisements for Dove products that featured models with a wide range of body sizes and types.[9]

In other cases, publicity campaigns focus on encouraging positive attitudes toward an organization or industry, without directly mentioning the products it sells. For example, in the 1980s Mobil Oil Company published "advertorials" — short opinion-based essays that ran in advertising space alongside the editorial page — in the *New York Times*. While Mobil's advertorials did not directly ask consumers to buy Mobil products, journalism scholars Vanessa Murphree and James Aucoin have observed that the advertorials both positioned Mobil as an expert on energy, and disputed news coverage that was unflattering to the company and other companies in the petroleum industry.[10]

Governments (and groups affiliated with governments) take similar approaches to building goodwill when they practice **public diplomacy**, or **public affairs**. These terms describe efforts to improve a country's reputation with people in other nations. Such campaigns can involve a mix of state actors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), advocacy organizations, publicists, and for-profit companies.[11]

Consider the practice of nation-branding, in which state agencies hire marketing or public relations firms to implement branding and marketing campaigns for the nation.[12] Media scholars Per Ståhlberg and Goran Bölin have tracked the public

relations firm CFC Consulting's "nation branding" efforts in Ukraine for over a decade. CFC's nation branding activities have included persuading TV network Euronews to include Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital city, on its weather map; promoting Ukrainian contestants in the Eurovision Song Contest (with support from the Ukrainian national television network); and partnering with CNN International to produce high-profile tourism advertisements for the country.[13]

Usually, the source of an advertising, public relations, or public diplomacy campaign is obvious. But some persuasion campaigns do not have an obvious source. **Information operations** was originally a military term that referred to the strategic use of technological, operational, and psychological resources to disrupt the enemy's informational capacities and protect friendly forces.[14] Social networking services, most notably Facebook, have adopted this term to refer to unidentified actors' deliberate and systematic attempts to steer public opinion using inauthentic accounts and inaccurate information.

A recent report from Facebook's Threat Intelligence team used the term to describe attempts to manipulate "foreign or domestic political sentiment" using deceptive content, inauthentic accounts, and astroturf (fake grassroots) user groups.[15] Facebook's adoption of a metaphor of information war shows that it takes recent attempts to game its attention economies very seriously indeed. Yet, Facebook's assertion that such campaigns "distort" users' "authentic civic engagement" raises some skepticism, given that *all* presentations of information to users of Facebook are curated by opaque systems and shaped by the imperatives of advertising and engagement metrics. It also raises the question of whether information operations is a euphemism that allows Facebook to avoid identifying the actors involved in such campaigns.

> In practice, the lines separating advertising, public relations, and public diplomacy (terms often regarded as neutral) from the pejorative term propaganda (which usually implies deliberate intent to manipulate or deceive) can be hard to discern.

Persuasive campaigns may involve accurate information, misinformation, disinformation, or a mix of all three; this is best assessed on a case-by-case basis. Any intention to mislead can be easily disavowed by using strategic framings to defend the campaign's legitimacy. This often takes the form of describing the campaign as educational or informative rather than persuasive, but can also involve claims of "setting the record straight" or confronting the status quo.

In practice, the lines separating advertising, public relations, and public diplomacy (terms often regarded as neutral) from the pejorative term **propaganda** (which usually implies deliberate intent to manipulate or deceive) can be hard to discern.[16]

Whether a campaign edges over from persuasion to manipulation or ideological indoctrination often depends on the perspective of the observer. Indeed, in many languages a single term is used for both the concept of publicity and that of persuasion. In Spanish, for example, *la propaganda* can refer to political communications, advertising, and even junk mail.

English-speaking critics may characterize persuasion campaigns that they deem manipulative or deceitful as propaganda. For example, media critic Andi Zeisler and other feminist media scholars have critiqued Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" for implying that women's ability to manifest "beauty" is more important than other accomplishments or aspirations.[17] From this perspective, even though the Dove campaign aims to expand definitions of beauty, it may be read as propaganda for a worldview that attempts to limit women's social power and autonomy by reducing them to their appearances. To give another example, Ståhlberg and Bölin observe how CFC Consulting's brochure for distribution at the 2011 World Economic Forum, "Ukraine—Moving in the Fast Lane," suggested economic recovery and success, while no such success stories yet existed.[18] Such an overly optimistic framing of Ukraine's financial prospects could be seen as edging over the line from positive spin to outright misrepresentation.

Propaganda can be designed to cultivate attitudes and/or provoke action. When a propaganda campaign is designed to provoke the audience to take a particular action, it can be termed **agitprop**.[19] For example, film historian Kumuthan Maderya, in his study of Tamil revolutionary cinema during the Cold War, differentiates between Tamil Marxist filmmakers' "art house" films, which explored the elites' oppression of the working class in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and agitprop films, which glorified violent revolution as a means of liberating the oppressed.[20] Today in the United States, the term **agitprop** is relatively rarely used, perhaps due to its association with Marxist thought.[21] When it is used, it is often as a synonym for **propaganda**.

One 20th century approach describes propaganda as either white, gray, or black, depending on the information's accuracy and whether it is distributed through official, unofficial, or covert channels. **White propaganda** uses accurate, albeit selectively presented, information, from accurately identified sources, whereas **black propaganda** uses inaccurate or deceptive information, in which the source of the information is obscured or misrepresented. **Gray propaganda** combines accurate and inaccurate content and sourcing information.[22] Sociologist Jesse Daniels has adopted these classifications for contemporary purposes in her study of "cloaked" white supremacist websites, which use innocuous-sounding organizational identities and misleading rhetoric to disguise their political agendas.[23]

The term **propaganda** had neutral or even positive associations in some circles during the early twentieth century, with groundbreaking publicist Edward Bernays using the term in the 1920s and 1930s as a neutral descriptor for his public relations techniques. But some progressive scholars and writers of the era, among them the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, considered propaganda to be a term for misleading and manipulative communications.[24] And particularly after the German Nazi Party's adoption of the word for its Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, the term became almost entirely negative in connotation in the United States, where it is associated with authoritarianism and governmental abuses of power. The anti-Semitic propaganda posters, leaflets, and films of the German Nazi regime are especially notorious because they facilitated the social exclusion, harassment, and eventual genocide of millions of Jewish European people. American authorities, too, deployed dehumanizing racial and ethnic caricatures in propaganda during World War II. For example, war mobilization posters in the U.S. depicted Japanese enemy soldiers as grotesque, devious, and animalistic. These images likely shored up support for the forced internment of over 100,000 Japanese American people between 1942 and 1946.

But understanding the term propaganda as mainly a reference to the practices of belligerent nations during wartime many decades ago can distance us from recognizing examples of manipulative public communication in our own time. Media scholars have studied a range of more recent issues through the lens of propaganda, including the mobilization of public opinion in support of the 1991 Gulf War, the marketing of prescription drugs, and the manufacturing of doubt around climate change.[25]

As these examples illustrate, the term propaganda need not be reserved for the actions of government agencies and political parties. It can be applied to a range of governmental and nongovernmental actors to critique their selective presentations of information, persuasive framings, and use of emotional appeals. Whether a persuasive campaign is publicity or propaganda, in short, is largely a matter of perspective.

SOWING CONFUSION AND DISTRACTION

Beyond the difficulties of distinguishing publicity from propaganda, there is an assumption in each of the terms above that every information campaign's goal is to foster support for a particular message or idea. However, recent events suggest otherwise. Some information campaigns do not tell people what to think, but instead aim to spread uncertainty or derail debate — fostering, ultimately, a growing distrust in the media.

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Gaslighting, a term derived from the 1938 play (and 1944 film) *Gas Light*,[26] has been used to describe situations in which a person orchestrates deceptions and inaccurately narrates events to the extent that their victim stops trusting their own judgments and perceptions.[27] The term has recently been adapted from psychological to political contexts, as journalists and commentators have adopted it to describe the Trump administration's use of misdirection, denial, and demonstrably false public statements.[28]

Campaigns to distract or confuse the public often involve multiple sources and aim to undermine trust in institutions. In January 2017, the American National Intelligence Council reported that Russian intelligence services had taken steps to interfere with the American presidential election and damage "public faith in the democratic process."[29] Historically, this bears some relation to what in the Soviet Union was called *dezinformatsiya* — coordinated state efforts to disseminate false or misleading information to the media in targeted countries or regions.[30] *Dezinformatsiya* was one aspect of the Soviet concept of *activnye meropriyatiya*, or "active measures," a catch-all term for a variety of techniques to strategically undermine and disrupt the policies and relations of opposition governments while strengthening allies of the Soviet Union.[31] Active measures included: spreading disinformation, especially with the goals of widening existing rifts; stoking existing tensions; and destabilizing other states' relations with their publics and one another. It also included various types of subversive action, such as, for example, establishing "front" organizations or financing opposition political movements.[32]

Today, commentators — among them journalist Mike Mariani and documentarian Adam Curtis — suggest that destabilization, rather than deception, appears to be the goal of Russia's active measures.[33] They point, in particular, to Kremlin "polit-

ical technologist" Vladislav Surkov, whose geopolitical strategies focus on destabilizing media authority and public perceptions of truth in targeted countries.

Well-intended efforts at debunking inaccurate information may not necessarily help: media literacy is necessary, but not sufficient for understanding today's problematic information flows. Sites that fact-check news stories or aim to debunk rumors are proliferating, but as media theorist Jayson Harsin has observed, these interventions make little headway in restoring the authority or legitimacy of the press or other social institutions.[34]

While active measures aim at disruption and destabilization, other techniques rely on distraction and derailing. Recently, media scholars have been using **xuanchuan**, a Chinese term, to describe a misdirectional strategy on social media in which coordinated posts don't spread false information, but instead flood conversational spaces with positive messages or attempts to change the subject.[35] These tactics — exemplified in China today by the "Fifty-Cent Army," a group of internet commentators thought to number in the millions — can steer public discourse as effectively as confrontation or debate or, conversely, lead dissenting members of the public to retreat from a discussion that they perceive to have become an echo chamber.[36]

As the prior discussion made clear, the difference between publicity and propaganda can be a matter of perspective. A deeper dig into the meaning of *xuanchuan* demonstrates that the ambiguous boundary between publicity and propaganda is a cross-cultural phenomenon. Even when used in reference to official state communications, xuanchuan does not carry negative connotations of deception or manipulation, but rather refers more broadly to the process of spreading information. As communication researcher Chungfeng Lin points out,

> Emergent techniques of sowing confusion and distraction are no excuse for jumping to dystopian or simplistic conclusions about the effects of digital technologies.

"the preaching practice of Confucius…is considered a perfect epitome of xuanchuan by Chinese scholars, regardless of the fact that what Confucius propagandized was not something evil and deceptive."[37]

Terms like *dezinformatsiya,* active measures, and *xuanchuan* can be useful because they offer models of population-scale information campaigns based on strategies other than simple deception. However, these terms should be used with care because of the cultural associations they can raise. Borrowing terms from other cultures introduces a risk of inadvertently reinforcing erroneous assumptions and stereotypes about those cultures. Moreover, identifying problematic information using a term from another language and culture without giving proper contextual information can run the risk of inadvertently legitimizing nationalistic or nativistic sentiments.

Finally, although talk of a "post-truth" era seems particularly linked to the rise of social media and digital communications, these emergent techniques of sowing confusion and distraction are no excuse for jumping to dystopian or simplistic conclusions about the effects of digital technologies. It would be irresponsible to assume that state powers and other organized or rhizomatic groups have no influence over online politics, but it would also be irresponsible to assume that such groups are invincible, or that digital communication technologies make them unstoppable.

MISINFORMATION AS CULTURAL COMMENTARY

Sometimes, people use media to intentionally spread fabricated, inaccurate, or exaggerated information to convey a critique or cultural commentary. Among these playful, humorous, or ironic presentations of information are satire, parody, culture jamming, and hoaxing.

Satire uses exaggeration, irony, and absurdity to amuse the audience, while calling attention to, and critiquing, perceived wrongdoing.[38] **Parody** is a form of satire that exaggerates the notable features of a public figure, artist, or genre.[39] **Culture jamming** turns the tools of parody against advertising culture, ironically repurposing the logos and conventions of advertising in order to critique corporate culture.[40, 41]

Figure 4. As the Moon Hoax story shows, there is a long history of people making sensational, but unprovable claims to generate advertising dollars.

People who create satires and parodies typically do not expect their works to be taken at face value. Rather, they assume that the audience will be in on the joke.

A **hoax** is a deliberate deception that plays on people's willingness to believe.[42] Hoaxes depend, at least initially, on some people taking them at face value. Often, hoaxes are a means of challenging authority, custom, or the status quo. However, the purpose of a hoax can be as simple as self-interest (as with, for example, hoaxes that aim to generate profit or publicity for the hoaxer).

The *New York Sun*'s 1935 moon hoax is a historical example of a financially-motivated hoax: the newspaper published articles over several days claiming that an astronomer had discovered evidence of bison, unicorns, and bat-people living on

the moon.[43, 44] From the mid-20th century onward, hoax stories in news outlets have been largely confined to April Fools' Day, and since the 1970s have involved a range of media outlets, advertisers, and website owners. Google's yearly April Fool's Day press releases, for example, have included the announcement of a data center on Mars nicknamed "Ziggy Stardust," and a Google Assistant called Google Gnome that could mow users' lawns.[45]

Figure 5. April Fool's blogpost image published on *Google Cloud Platform Blog*, purportedly of "Ziggy Stardust," the search giant's Martian data center.

Such spoofs and pranks put journalists', publishers', and marketers' professional skills to playful use. Folklorist Moira Smith points out that April Fool's Day joke press releases and stories are a form of "deep play" that surfaces, for a moment, the contradictions and tensions of the journalistic profession or the communications industries, namely the responsibilities of accurately informing the public and the pressure to attract and retain the attention of fickle audiences.[46]

Still, the networked nature of social media complicates the use of misinformation for cultural commentary. Online content often spreads far beyond its original context, and sometimes it can be difficult to judge whether a piece of content is serious or satirical in nature. As media folklorist Whitney Phillips and digital culture theorist Ryan Milner point out, online discourse is subject to Poe's Law, which observes that in online settings, it is almost impossible to unambiguously tell satire from sincere communication.[47]

As with disinformation being labeled misformation because journalists cannot establish with total certainty an actor's deceptive intent, the ambiguity inherent in irony can be instrumentalized. Those who espouse ideas and actions far outside the mainstream can always claim their actions were "satire" in the face of blowback or criticism. The defense of "it was just a joke!" mobilizes plausible deniability and frames anyone who objects as intolerant of free speech. But as Phillips and Milner observe, Poe's Law suggests that the consequences of placing problematic content into the public discourse are often the same regardless of whether or not the speaker is sincere.

IMPERFECT WORDS FOR AN IMPERFECT WORLD

The words we have are not perfect. Sometimes they don't fully capture the complexity of current events, in which new media platforms afford new strategies for a range of actors, from individuals to companies to governments, for using information to manipulate, control, or profit from audiences under the guise of informing them. In some cases, people and organizations seek to undermine media institutions or otherwise sow confusion and doubt. In others, people and organizations circulate problematic information — purposely, or without regard for its accuracy — because they want to profit from web traffic. And in some cases, well-intentioned people may unwittingly circulate problematic information, especially via social media platforms that are designed to make sharing easy.

> In today's information environment, we may need to modify and qualify the terms we have, or find new metaphors and models that acknowledge the complexity and ambiguity of today's problematic information.

The dictionary definitions of the terms discussed in this guide only provide "ideal types": abstract, generalized models that highlight particular actors, motives, or purposes.[48] But as the examples in this guide make clear, events in the real world often deviate from or complicate these idealized, abstract definitions. In today's information environment, we may need to modify and qualify the terms we have, or find new metaphors and models that acknowledge the complexity and ambiguity of today's problematic information.

The term chosen to describe an information campaign conveys information about who is running that campaign and the goals they might have in running it. It also reveals information about the writer — namely, how she assesses the accuracy, validity, and potential consequences of the information campaign. Misinformation and disinformation should be discussed with care; writers must be mindful that their representations of problematic information in today's world can bolster assumptions that may be erroneous, re-inscribe social divisions, or make adversaries out to be more powerful than they actually are.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The words we use matter. They can shape the way we understand social problems and their potential solutions. The recent controversies regarding "fake news" have prompted many conversations about problematically inaccurate or deceptive information that is circulating in novel, disorienting ways. In their efforts to grapple with this slippery and multifaceted subject, journalists, educators, advocates, and other influencers must be careful not to produce more problematic information in the course of their discussions.

Without careful use of the terminology associated with these problematic forms of information — **misinformation**, **disinformation**, **propaganda**, **gaslighting**, and the like — important distinctions between these different phenomena can be lost. To address the distinct but interrelated concerns raised by different types of problematic content, it is essential that writers acknowledge and untangle the distinctions between the various phenomena that come up in discussions of "fake news" or a "post-truth" condition in politics — and, further, that they consider and explain the implications of problematic information when it appears in a diverse range of contexts.

This guide is intended to help speakers, writers, and thinkers express their ideas with regard to problematic information more clearly, highlighting how the terms we rely on can sometimes limit our understanding or create vulnerabilities for motivated actors to exploit. The words we choose to describe media manipulation can generate certain assumptions about how information spreads, who spreads it, and who receives it. The ways we talk about media manipulation can thereby shape what kinds of interventions or solutions seem desirable, appropriate, or even possible.

This isn't to suggest that the matter is as simple as choosing the one right word. Real events are complex, and the categories we have can break down when they fail to capture the complexity of the lived events. Still, speakers and writers can become more aware of the limitations of each of these concepts, explain these limitations to audiences, and provide detail and context that aid better understanding or inform more effective interventions.

Individuals, groups and institutions circulate problematic information for a variety of reasons. Some are sincerely trying to inform others, but get caught up in circulating inaccurate or misleading information unknowingly. Others may know the information is inaccurate or misleading, and circulate it anyway to achieve deliberate aims: to turn a profit, to convey an ideology, or to disrupt the status quo, to name a few.

The distinction between misinformation and disinformation has often been used to capture that difference in intent. While both terms refer to misleading information, misinformation is usually used to imply no deliberate intent to mislead, while disinformation implies knowing deception. It is often difficult, however, to prove the actor's intent. In public discourse, misinformation is thus used more frequently than disinformation — a tendency that deceptive actors can exploit to try to maintain credibility.

One of the challenges of describing problematic information is that there are many different labels we might apply to such information, and these terms do not always have mutually exclusive definitions. Rather, their meanings have blurry and overlapping boundaries.

A variety of systematic persuasion campaigns, for example, are familiar aspects of day-to-day life — **advertising** (companies trying to persuade the public to buy goods and services), **public relations** (companies, nonprofit organizations, or other nongovernmental groups trying to persuade the public to view them more positively), and **public diplomacy/public affairs** (countries trying to improve their public reputations in other nations), to name a few. In these sorts of campaigns, the aims, agents, and means tend to be clear and recognizable. In some cases, however, the originators of information are unclear.

Social networking services, most notably Facebook, have adopted **information operations**, a military term for the strategic use of technological, operational, and psychological resources, to refer to unidentified actors' deliberate and systematic attempts to influence public opinion by spreading inaccurate information with puppet accounts. Whether these various types of information campaigns can rightly be referred to as **propaganda** — *s*ystematic information campaigns that are deliberately manipulative or deceptive — is often a matter of perspective.

Other terms — **hoax**, **satire**, **parody**, and **culture jamming** — refer to cases in which fabricated, inaccurate, or exaggerated information is spread intentionally to convey a critique or cultural commentary. But again, it is difficult to infer intent from a particular piece of content or the various means, anticipated or unanticipated, by which it may come to spread. These conditions make it hard to apply terms such as satire or hoax with certainty. Further, agents who deliberately spread misleading content may be driven by several different aims, yet can find a convenient, and unifying, alibi in terms such as these.

Problematic content, and the ways it moves online, have become prominent concerns in the public imagination. There is a risk that coverage can inadvertently advance any of the multiple goals potentially in play for the agents involved, and

could further disorient readers by spreading problematic information *about* problematic information. The stakes are high: culture, profits, politics, and the notion of truth itself are in the balance.

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FIGURES

Page 2, Figure 1: Tweet from *The Daily Express* reporting inaccurate information about a Manchester shooting. Retrieved May 31, 2017 from https://www.buzzfeed.com/jimwaterson/manchester-arena-fake-news?utm_term=.llQNYprKv#.ifb79xB3M. See Waterson, Esposito, and Sanusi (2017, May 31).

Page 2, Figure 2: Screenshot of YouTube video from the Columbia Chemicals misinformation campaign. Retrieved June 7, 2017 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBXwwKtRtrI.

Page 5, Figure 3: An advertorial published in the *New York Times*. Retrieved August 7, 2017 from http://polluterwatch.org/category/freetagging/lee-raymond. For further information on advertorials, see Murphree, V., and Aucoin, J., (2010).

Page 11, Figure 4: As the Moon Hoax story shows, there is a long history of people making sensational, but unprovable claims to generate advertising dollars. Image retrieved August 7, 2017 from https://commons.m.-wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Inhabitants_of_the_Moon%2C_1836%2C_Welsh_edition.png.

Page 12, Figure 5: April Fool's blogpost image published on *Google Cloud Platform Blog*, purportedly of "Ziggy Stardust," the search giant's Martian data center. Retrieved August 4, 2017 from https://cloud-platform.googleblog.com/2017/03/Google-Cloud-Platform-expands-to-Mars.html.